

Historical Transition of Gender Roles in China

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This article delves into the intricate landscape of gender roles within China, employing a historical lens to dissect the evolution of these roles throughout key periods of Chinese societal transformation. The study centres on three pivotal epochs in contemporary China: the pre-liberation era (prior to 1949), the era of socialist construction (1949-1978), and the phase of economic reform (post-1978). Despite the undeniably persistent underpinning of traditional gender roles throughout history, this analysis offers insight into the essence of feminist movements—an ongoing struggle against the subjugation of women. While notable strides have been made in enhancing the status and rights of women in recent decades, it becomes evident that achieving genuine gender equality necessitates a more nuanced approach beyond the mere expansion of educational and occupational opportunities for women. True transformation mandates heightened awareness of gender inequality across all societal domains, catalysing collective participation in social initiatives by both genders. This article underscores the imperative of multifaceted engagement to drive meaningful and lasting shifts in gender dynamics.

Keywords: historical transition, gender roles, gender equality, feminism

Introduction

Gender roles explain how people are expected to act, speak, dress, groom, and behave in accordance with their assigned sex. However, this concept varies across histories and societies. During pre-industrial societies, types of agriculture, such as plough use and cereal agriculture, influence the way people view women and men (Hansen, Jenson, & Skovsgaard, 2015). Due to the fact that these forms of material production normally require a great deal of labour, biological differences between males and females lead to their different concentrations. While males were disposed to work in the field, females were more inclined to devote themselves to their families (Alesina, Giuliano, & Nunn, 2013). According to this division of labour usage, cultural norms are generated regarding the distinct roles of men and women, that is, work is the domain of men, while household chores are the domain of women, which are often referred to as traditional gender roles (Guttek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991; Hansen et al., 2015; Yang, 2017). Despite centuries of passing, these cultural beliefs or judgements continue to influence the majority of contemporary countries throughout the world, resulting in gender inequalities in public participation, education, social attainment, and employment (Alesina et al., 2013; Jayachandran, 2014). With a history of agriculture spanning over 2,000 years, expected gender roles in Chinese society are largely consistent with this traditional pattern. Over centuries, gender norms (work is for men, family affairs are for women) have deeply rooted themselves in people's minds (Zhang, 2017; Qi, 2019). As time passes, however, it is experiencing changes. In this article, gender roles in Chinese society will be illustrated and discussed in the context of its historical development. It will cover three historical periods of

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contemporary China: (1) the pre-liberation period (prior to 1949), (2) the socialism construction period (between 1949 and 1978), and (3) the economic reform period (after 1978).

Traditional Gender Roles Prevailed Before 1949

Chinese society was largely influenced by transition expectations concerning gender roles prior to 1949. Throughout China's feudal history, traditional gender roles were initially disseminated and reinforced through cultural norms and symbols in the form of traditional customs and folk discourse. The stereotypes of men and women were differentiated according to gender, such as strong (men) and weak (women), hard (men) and soft (women), master (men) and slave (women), etc. (Liu & Tong, 2014; Yang, 2017). In addition to this, Confucianism as a national belief developed a series of value systems, e.g., *san gang wu chang*. It stipulates that a wife should obey her husband (*fu wei qi gang*), only sons are heirs of the father (*fu si zi ji*), and men are for work while women should focus on housework (*nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei*) (Liu, 2011). Furthermore, patriarchy is another important aspect of Chinese culture. Also encouraged by Confucianism, it reinforced cultural norms regarding an important gender expectation that a woman's role is primarily domestic. As a result, women were considered to be dependent upon males, such as fathers, husbands, and sons, throughout their lives (Wang & Wu, 2019). As said in a Chinese adage (*jia chu qu de nv er, po chu qu de shui*), raising a daughter was of no value for the birth parents, since she would ultimately belong to someone else. Men's important position, however, was at work, since he would be financially responsible for the entire family (Liu & Tong, 2014). Such different gender roles and expectations could give rise to different challenges. Men could benefit from more attention and resources from their birth families; however, they were also responsible for providing financial support for older family members as feedback (Jayachandran, 2014). For women, there was a misconception that infertility was a woman's fault, causing a great deal of psychological distress, guilt, and pressure for the individuals involved (Dong & Tang, 2013).

The Political Construction of Gender Roles (1949 to 1978)

It appears that the People's Republic of China greatly improved the social status and public participation of women during its socialism construction period (1949-1978). Originally, it was one of the objectives of the revolution and civil war to liberate females from the oppressions of previous powers and problematic norms (Kang, 1978). Other than this political agenda, a more in-depth reason is that more labour forces were required when the country was just being established. Having more women participate in the workplace was pressing (Jiang, 2012). As part of socialist construction and new citizenship, women were therefore encouraged to work outside the home (Song, 2012). At the same time, slogans and propaganda such as "women held up half the sky", "let's free the female from housework", and "male and female are equal" were widely broadcast across the country (Jin, 2006; Zurndorfer, 2018).

Such social changes could have helped defuse the traditional pattern of gender roles. However, the reality was far from the case. The traditional gender roles were still prevalent. Socialist China manifested gender equality in such a way that required females to work and contribute equally to society as males. However, their right to equal treatment and the opportunity to participate in society were not guaranteed. There were not enough job openings that were suitable for female workers in the country (Song, 2012). The world of public affairs was still dominated by men, as female leaders were scarcely visible (Zurndorfer, 2018). Some worked in the public sector or factories, but their jobs were mostly low-skilled and ancillary, with the ultimate goal of

improving the work efficiency of males (Jiang, 2012). The majority of them, especially those living in rural areas, were stranded in unpaid housework (Song, 2012). Furthermore, the political construction of gender roles was noticeable. There was a great deal of political importance placed on household chores and childcare during that period. At that time, women were described as “cisterns”; their responsibility was to provide the workforce as needed by the country (Jin, 2006, p. 173). According to a report issued by the Fourth All-China Democratic Women’s Federation (Kang, 1978), females in China have been *hou qin li liang* (logistic strength), working alongside male workers to achieve *si ge xian dai hua* (the modernisation of agriculture, industry, national defence, and technology). In the meantime, the task of child-giving and rearing was defined as *pei yang ge ming jie ban ren* (cultivating revolutionary descendants). Even so, it is worth noting that women’s contributions to society and their social status were remarkably acknowledged, in contrast to the pre-liberation period (Jiang, 2012).

A Strong Tradition of Gender Roles (1978 Onwards)

Based on Western experience, dramatic changes in economic patterns, i.e., from agriculture to the service industry and technological advancements as well as a decline in childbearing risk and number will increase women’s participation in the job market, leading to a higher social status and a stronger voice against gender inequality (Jayachandran, 2014). Similar stories took place in contemporary China. Since 1978, Chinese society has experienced sweeping changes: the fertility rate and the number of family members have decreased, while the total education level of the Chinese population and the number of job opportunities for women in non-agricultural fields have increased (Yang, 2017). Therefore, opportunities for social mobility and increased public participation have enhanced the social status of female populations (Liu & Tong, 2014). Also owing to greater participation in education and employment, young females in recent decades are more aware of the importance of gender equality (Wang & Wu, 2019). Political movements may impact this process, too. The One Child Policy (1982-2015) regulated the number of family members strictly. There was a prohibition on having more than one child in most families, regardless of sex. To some extent, this contributed to a higher social status for females and social acceptance of gender equality. Under this context, more young people abandoned traditional gender roles. More female leaders are active on the screen and in the workplace. It also becomes less surprising to find that males participate in domestic affairs. An increasing number of couples share housework, which used to be only considered a female’s responsibility (Tong & Liu, 2015).

However, traditional gender roles have not lost many of their followers. Among young people, traditional Chinese family values such as *nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei* (men/husbands go out and earn money, while women/wives stay at home and manage household tasks) and *gan de hao bu ru jia de hao* (being a successful career is not as good as being a successful marriage) remain popular (Yang, 2017; Qi, 2018). Data from the third Survey of Women’s Social Status in China with 26,166 participants were analysed by Liu and Tong in 2014. According to the study, 61.1% of males and 54.9% of females approve of the statement, “society belongs to men; family belongs to women”. The number of participants who agree that “earning money to support the family is the responsibility of the male” as well as “the husband’s achievement is more important than his wife’s” exceeds half as well. They note that male samples are more likely to adhere to gender roles traditionally associated with men. Other researchers reached a similar conclusion by interpreting another database. According to data from the China Comprehensive Social Survey (2012), more than half of the respondents

believe “mother stays at home; father works” is the ideal family strategy, while nearly 60% maintain “father stays at home; mother works outside” is the worst arrangement for a family (N = 2,691) (Zhang, 2017). Although female education, employment and public participation has increased dramatically, for the majority (70%), housework responsibilities, e.g., cooking, childcare, and housekeeping, are not shared by males, which creates more likelihood of work-family conflicts for females (Tong & Liu, 2015). It remains the case that they benefit from limited personal choices and more expectation of being responsible for doing housework. Thus, many females have to abandon their careers when facing the choice between family and work (Zhang, 2017).

Conclusions

In this article, gender roles in China have been examined by taking historical transitions of Chinese society into account. It focused on three historical periods of contemporary China: (1) the pre-liberation period (prior to 1949), (2) the socialism construction period (between 1949 and 1978), and (3) the economic reform period (after 1978). There is no doubt a strong root of traditional gender roles persists and has prevailed throughout history. This may serve as an illustration of the nature of feminist movements: this is a challenging and struggling process of fighting against oppression against women (Fan, 2011). In spite of the significant advancements in the status and rights of females over the past few decades, it does not appear that gender equality can be achieved solely by increasing the number of opportunities available to women in education and employment. To bring about more positive changes, there must be greater awareness of gender inequality in all domains of society and participation in social action by both men and women.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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